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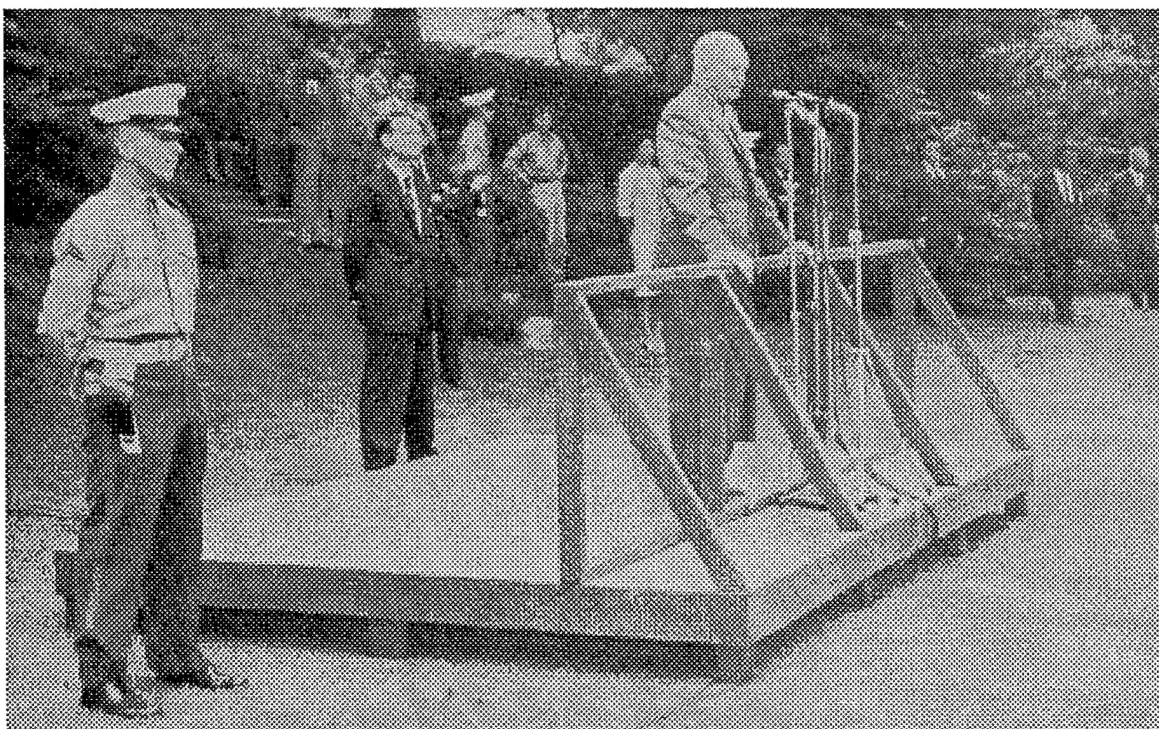
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INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM:

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER'S FOREIGN POLICY



by

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Intervention in Vietnam, President Eisenhower's Foreign Policy

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For a period of thirty years, from 1945 to 1975, the United States employed countless numbers of financial, material, and human resources toward Vietnam in an effort to shape and control that country's political destiny. Large scale American military involvement effectively began in March of 1965, with the landing of U.S. Marines to defend DaNang airfield. By March of 1969, the number of U.S. forces alone deployed to prosecute the Vietnam War exceeded 600,000. By war's end, more than 3.5 million (estimated) combat casualties were sustained by the U.S., South, and North Vietnamese forces. How did the United States come to be involved in this Southeastern Asian nation? What political forces were in action that caused American leaders to view the fate of Vietnam as a critical national security interest? Who was responsible for the 46,000 Americans killed in action during this unpopular war?

This paper will analyze American involvement during the Eisenhower years (1954-1960). The focus will be on the foreign policy decisions made with regard to our ensuing intervention. The argument made is that the steadfast anti-colonial and anti-Communist views held by Eisenhower dictated the direction American policy would follow during the crisis at Dienbienphu, the conference at Geneva, and the establishment of the government in South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem. His anti-colonial views kept the U.S. from providing critical direct military assistance to the French during Dienbienphu, even though strong pressure was being applied from many directions. But his persistent anti-Communist approach kept America involved, even if long standing American principles

needed to be overlooked. By the end of Eisenhower's second term, his policies resulted in the U.S. not having yet committed combat forces into the region, but firmly entrenching America in the fate of South Vietnam.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel James F. Slaton (M.S., Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) has been interested in the Vietnam War since he entered the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1970, two years after the Tet Offensive and three years before the cease-fire agreements were signed in Paris and the last American troops left Vietnam. His interest was further piqued in 1975-76 while attending F-4 fighter training at George AFB, California. While there the vast majority of his instructor pilots and weapon systems officers had served in Vietnam and most of the tactics they taught him were learned over the skies of Southeast Asia. He had the opportunity to fly in combat himself several years later when he served with the 493rd Tactical Fighter Squadron as the Operations Officer during Operation Desert Storm and as Commander of the 492d Fighter Squadron during Operations Provide Comfort II and Deny Flight. He has logged 56 combat sorties and holds the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Cluster. Colonel Slaton is a student at the Air War College, due to graduate in June 1995.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

The eight years of the Eisenhower presidency were marked by a foreign policy that unwaveringly viewed an independent, non-Communist, sovereign state of South Vietnam as vital to American strategic interests. How to achieve this goal, however, was a question that Eisenhower would struggle with and never solve. This paper will examine Eisenhower's foreign policy and leadership with regard to Vietnam. The stage will be set with a look at how he converted President Truman's policy of containment into a more aggressive approach, the numerous dilemmas he faced in executing that policy, and his approach to the French role in the area. Next, an examination of the events leading up to the crisis at Dienbienphu will focus on the foreign policy contradictions he faced with French involvement, the debate relating to and the conditions he established for U.S. intervention, his attempts at alliance building, the British position, and an evaluation of his leadership during the crisis. Thirdly, the results and problems generated at the Geneva Conference leading to the decision to support the new government of Diem will be examined, closing with some of the voices of concern that were raised and a focus on the breakdown of principles exhibited by the Eisenhower administration. An analysis of the widening North/South Vietnamese split will follow, probing various issues including the absence of the 1956 elections, the Quemoy incident, and the Vietminh viewpoint. Finally, a look at the Eisenhower legacy will show that through all the strengths and weaknesses Eisenhower exhibited during his eight years in office, the multitude of decisions made kept the U.S. out of combat in Vietnam, solidified our presence there, and left future administrations the problem that would become an American tragedy.

PART II: THE FUNDAMENTAL POLICY IS ESTABLISHED

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM

When Dwight Eisenhower took office in January 1953, he generally accepted the foreign policy toward Vietnam laid down by his predecessor, Harry Truman. He felt that Ho Chi Minh was an instrument of international Communism and the fall of Indochina would have disastrous political, economic, and strategic consequences for the United States.¹ In an address before the Overseas Press Club of America in April 1954, Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles explained how Indochina was but a small piece of the much larger monolithic, Communist threat. "In the present stage, the Communists in Indochina use nationalistic anti-French slogans to win local support. But if they achieved military or political success, it is certain that they would subject the people to a cruel Communist dictatorship taking its orders from Peiping and Moscow...we are forced to take account of the fact that the Chinese Communist regime has been consistently and viciously hostile to the United States. A typical Chinese Communist pamphlet reads: 'We Must Hate America, because She is the Chinese People's Implacable Enemy.' 'We Must Despise America because it is a Corrupt Imperialist Nation, the World Center of Reaction and Decadency.' 'We Must Look down upon America because She is a Paper Tiger and Entirely Vulnerable to Defeat.'"² Explaining what disastrous consequences would befall America were Indochina to fall into Communist hands, Dulles explained to the nation during a radio and television address that "What started out as a

¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 2nd edition, 25.

civil war has now been taken over by international communism for its own purposes... Furthermore, in the event all of Southeast Asia falls under Communism, an alignment with communism in India, and in the longer term, of the Middle East (with the probable exceptions of at least Pakistan and Turkey) could follow progressively. Such alignment would seriously endanger the stability and security of Europe. Communist control of all of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would threaten the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore island chain and would seriously jeopardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East. The loss of Southeast Asia would have serious economic consequences for many nations of the free world and conversely would add significant resources to the Soviet bloc. Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia, is the principal world source of natural rubber and tin, and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities. The loss of Southeast Asia, especially of Malaya and Indonesia, could result in such economic and political pressures in Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to communism.”³

Eisenhower explained it in terms of a “pay me now, or pay me later” concept when he told a Governor's Conference “So, when the United States votes \$400 million to help that war, we are not voting for a giveaway program. We are voting for the cheapest way that we can to prevent the occurrence of something that would be of the most terrible significance for the United States of America-our security, our power and ability to get certain things we need from the riches of the Indonesian territory, and from Southeast

² Senator Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers, The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam, Volume 1*, (Boston, Massachusetts: The Beacon Press, 1971), p. 594

³ *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington D.C.), May 17, 1954, p. 744

Asia.”⁴ Dulles played a very strong role in the formulation of Eisenhower's foreign policy and during the presidential campaign, had warned Eisenhower “Korea is important, but the really important spot is Indochina.”⁵ He went on to explain, that the Soviet “program” was to exhaust American resources in a series of local actions around the world at times and places of their choosing. Korea, Indochina, and Morocco were “present illustrations.”⁶ A warning was sent to the Chinese soon after Eisenhower took office when Dulles announced, “There is a risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina.”⁷

A NEW APPROACH LEADS TO NSC 5405

Early in his campaign, Eisenhower attacked the Democrats for failing to halt the spread of Communism. He was determined to prevent the fall of Indochina and to accomplish this, felt the policy of containment left by his predecessor needed to be more ambitious and aggressive.⁸ The new activist policy was adopted and explained in a speech Dulles wrote for Eisenhower. “We will have a dynamic policy of liberation which will develop a resistance spirit within the captive peoples. This is the only effective check on aggressive despotism short of general war.”⁹ George Kennan, the American ambassador to Moscow, whom Eisenhower had chosen to participate in the highly secret Solarium exercise (formulated to clarify various alternatives of U.S. foreign policy towards the

⁴ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 592

⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower, The President*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 173

⁶ Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam, From World War II Through Dienbienphu, 1941-1954*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 128

⁷ Leslie H. Gelb, Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, (Washington D.C.:The Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 51

⁸ Herring, p. 25

Soviet Union) recommended to the National Security Council (NSC) that "The U.S. must try a policy which will ease the French out in a couple of years in order to develop indigenous forces as in Korea."¹⁰ Dulles pushed for a more active role and Eisenhower agreed that the United States should be more involved. At the outset of his Presidency, he made attempts, against French opposition, to pursue a more active role. Addressing an Illinois crowd, he stated "We don't want Asia to feel that the white man of the West is his enemy. If there must be a war, let it be Asians against Asians, with our support on the side of freedom."¹¹ Speaking to the French National Political Science Institute in May of 1952, Dulles told them "I should be personally glad to see us do more, for you have really been left too much alone to discharge a task which is vital to us all."¹² Signs of this new, more active role appeared when the State Department announced that "...A U.S. military mission headed by Lt. Gen. John W. O'Daniel, present commander U.S. Army Pacific, will arrive at Saigon on June 20 (1953)...It is believed essential to insure an increasingly close integration of U.S. assistance with the plans developed by the authorities of France and of the Associated States."¹³

In Jan 1954, the President's special committee on Indochina decided to augment the U.S. Military Mission in Indochina by 200 men, technicians and airplane mechanics, and to send 22 B-26 medium bombers to the French.¹⁴ In March, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Admiral Arthur Radford presented Eisenhower a memorandum from the President's Special Committee on Indochina. In it he stated that

⁹ Gardner, p. 121

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 138

¹¹ Ibid., p. 132

¹² Ibid., p. 135

¹³ Gardner, p. 144

"During the period 20-24 March, I conducted a series of discussions with General Paul Ely, Chairman of the French Chiefs of Staff, on the situation in Indochina. ... I presented to General Ely our views in regard to expanding the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] to assist the French in training the Vietnamese, indicating to him the importance which we attach to this action, first, to obtain better results, secondly to release French officers for combat service. General Ely was most unsympathetic to any encroachment on French responsibilities or significant expansion of the MAAG. The reasons given related to French 'prestige,' possible lack of confidence in French leadership by the Vietnamese, 'the political situation in France' etc. I conclude that the French are disposed firmly to resist any delegation of training responsibilities to the U.S. MAAG."¹⁵

The adoption of NSC 5405 in January 1954, after nearly a year in office, clearly pointed towards what Eisenhower felt was a military solution to Indochina. It indicated that the Communist and Non-Communist worlds were clearly in confrontation and "the loss of the struggle in Indochina...would therefore have the most serious repercussions on the U.S. and free world interests in Europe and elsewhere."¹⁶ It went on to say "With continued U.S. economic and material assistance, the Franco-Vietnamese forces are not in danger of being militarily defeated by the Vietminh unless there is large-scale Chinese Communist intervention."¹⁷

¹⁴ Gelb, p. 52

¹⁵ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 456

¹⁶ Department of Defense, *United States - Vietnam Relations 1945-1967, Vol. 1*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. A-51

¹⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 437

SEVERAL DILEMMAS

By early 1954, Eisenhower already faced several dilemmas regarding the problems in Indochina. A leader who consistently used his staff members to build consensus, he repeatedly asked one basic question: Since we all agreed in NSC 5405 that we must "prevent the countries of Southeast Asia from passing into the communist orbit," how do we accomplish this?¹⁸ Most of his staff felt the answer lay in a military option, but the strategy of "Massive Retaliation" adopted in NSC 162/2 proved inflexible for any realistic course of action. Adopted in Oct 1953, NSC 162/2 listed Indochina as an area of strategic importance. It stated that an attack on such important areas "probably would compel the United State to react with military force either locally at the point of the attack or generally against the military power of the aggressor."¹⁹

A second dilemma was the role which American allies, particularly France, should play. The French had already lost over 1500 officers and 9600 enlisted troops killed in Indochina and the mounting death toll was exacting a price back home in France.²⁰ In 1953, the Vietminh had launched an invasion into Laos with the goal of forcing the French to spread their forces thin. This invasion and the subsequent deteriorating situation disappointed Eisenhower and shattered his belief in a French victory.²¹ In April 1954, a Special Committee reviewing NSC 5405 recommended the U.S. take "all affirmative and practical steps, with or without its European allies, to provide tangible evidence of Western strength and determination to defeat Communism. All possible political and

¹⁸ Gelb, p. 55

¹⁹ DoD, p. B-5

²⁰ James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, The Military, and America's Intervention in Vietnam*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 105

²¹ Ibid., p. 114-115

economic pressure on France must be exerted as the obvious initial course of action to reinforce the French will be to continue operating in Indochina. This course of action will jeopardize the existing French Cabinet, may be unpopular among the French public, and may be considered as endangering present U.S. policy with respect to EDC [European Defense Community]. The free world position, not only in Southeast Asia but in Europe and the Middle East as well, is such as to require the most extraordinary efforts to prevent Communist domination of Southeast Asia.”²²

They went on to recommend that the U.S. needed to “ensure that there be initiated no cease-fire in Indochina prior to victory whether that be by successful military action or clear concession of defeat by the Communists. Should Indochina be lost, it is clear...that the involvement of U.S. resources either in an attempt to stop the further spread of Communism in the Far East...or to initiate offensive operations to retake and reorient Indochina, will greatly exceed those needed to hold Indochina before it falls.”²³ Dulles admitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that although the options were distasteful, in the “divided spirit” of the world today, the U.S. would have to tolerate the colonialist a bit longer to help block Soviet and Chinese infiltration of Southeast Asia.²⁴

Eisenhower's third dilemma was how to stop the spread of international Communism without Americans fighting a war in Indochina. He told the NSC “with great force” that there was “just no sense in even talking about United States forces replacing the French in Indochina...If we did so, the Vietnamese could be expected to transfer their hatred of the French to us. I can not tell you...how bitterly opposed I am to such a course

²² *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 474

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 475

of action. This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by the divisions!”²⁵ At a February 1954 news conference, Eisenhower stated, “I say that I cannot conceive of a greater tragedy for America than to get heavily involved now in an all-out war in any of those regions, particularly with large units.”²⁶ Responding to a question at the press conference, Eisenhower said, “No one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am; consequently, every move that I authorize is calculated, as far as humans can do it, to make certain that that does not happen.”²⁷

SUPPORT FOR FRANCE, BUT...

Determined to 'save' Vietnam without American combat troop involvement, Eisenhower nevertheless told a group of legislative leaders “...we can't get anywhere in Asia by just sitting here in Washington and doing nothing - my God, we must not lose Asia...”²⁸ He explained his belief that indigenous Asian forces would have to do most of the fighting, “with the United States providing a mobile reserve for the overall security of the free world.”²⁹ Eisenhower felt strongly that the U.S. must uphold its moral principles. In his ensuing memoirs he expressed his feelings at the time, “The strongest reason of all for the United States (to stay out) is the fact that among all the powerful nations of the world the United States is the only one with a tradition of anti-colonialism...The standing of the United States as the most powerful of the anti-colonial powers is an asset of

²⁴ David L. Anderson, *Shadow on the White House, Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 45

²⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace, Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 124

²⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 593

²⁷ Gardner, p. 174

²⁸ Ambrose, p.175

incalculable value to the Free World...The moral position of the United States was more to be guarded than the Tonkin Delta, indeed all of Indochina.”³⁰ Insight into the President's leadership style was provided in May 1954 by Robert Cutler, Special Assistant to the President, in a memo to the Secretary of Defense and CJCS. Eisenhower had reviewed the draft of a speech Dulles was going to make and made quite a few suggestions and changes in the text. He thought the speech should include some easy to understand slogans, such as “The U.S. will never start a war,” “The U.S. will not go to war without Congressional authority,” “The U.S., as always, is trying to organize cooperative efforts to sustain peace.”³¹ Finally he decided the least painful way to accomplish his goals was to support the French effort by contributing American aid. A meeting of the President's Special Committee on Indochina reported that “Ten B-26 aircraft are on the way to Indochina this week. These would contribute to filling the French request for aircraft to bring two B-26 squadrons up to a strength of 25 operational aircraft each. In summary, it was agreed,

- “A. To provide a total of 22 B-26 aircraft as rapidly as practicable.
- B. To provide 200 uniformed U.S. Air Force mechanics.”³²

By January 1954, American aid accounted for almost 80% of the French war effort.³³

Although Eisenhower's first State of the Union Address described France's struggle against the Vietminh as holding “the line of freedom” against “Communist aggression throughout the world”³⁴, overall he was unhappy with France's performance.

²⁹ Gardner, p. 171

³⁰ Ambrose, p. 177

³¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 502

³² Ibid., p. 445

³³ Anderson, p. 45

³⁴ Ibid.

Eisenhower complained that the declaration of future Vietnamese independence by new French cabinet leader, Joseph Laniel, had been made "in an obscure and roundabout fashion-instead of boldly, forthrightly, and repeatedly." The JCS complained about France's willingness and ability to accept newly appointed General Navarre's plan (discussed later), but by now the two nations were caught up in a "tangle of mutual dependence and spiraling commitments."³⁵ As Dulles explained it "the French were then opposed to what they called 'internationalizing' the war. They preferred to treat it as a civil war of rebellion."³⁶ Eisenhower did not like supporting colonialism, but felt it would have to be tolerated a bit longer to achieve the higher good of deterring Communist aggression. French strategy, he felt, was flawed and their leadership poor and uninspired, but with improvements in both, they could win the war within a year.

He insisted the French keep Washington informed of their plans and operations and appoint a "forceful and inspirational leader," and make a "clear and unequivocal announcement...that France seeks self-rule for Indochina and that practical political freedom will be an accomplished fact as soon as victory against the Communists is won."³⁷ The French appointed General Henri Navarre and was soon applauded as the first French commander to take the offensive since January 1952. Commenting on French foreign minister, Georges Bidault's, plan for victory put forth at the December 1953 Bermuda Conference, Eisenhower said, "While he did not mean that they were really hopeful of

³⁵ Herring, p. 27

³⁶ *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington D.C.), June 28, 1954, p. 971

³⁷ Ambrose, p. 101

securing an early and decisive military victory, he did mean that for the first time they were thinking of winning eventually.”³⁸

That winter, MAAG Chief Lieutenant General John W. “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, submitted a progress report on the first six months of the Navarre Plan which summarized what the French had been doing and what remained to be accomplished. The report said that French Union forces held the initiative and would begin offensives in mid-January in the Mekong Delta and the region between Cape Varella and Da Nang.³⁹ But, not everyone within Eisenhower’s administration was so optimistic. Admiral Radford (CJCS) considered the report over-optimistic, stating that political and psychological factors were of such crucial importance that no victory would be possible until the Vietnamese were able to capture villages and psychological warfare operations could be undertaken to win over the people. The army attaché in Saigon was even less hopeful. He flatly stated that the French, after six months of the Navarre Plan, were still on the defensive and showed no sign of being able to win the war in the future. The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence concurred with the attaché and reported that other high ranking U.S. military officers in Indochina agreed with the attaché and found O’Daniel’s report unwarrantedly optimistic.⁴⁰ Concerned with France’s half-hearted attempt to cooperate with his requests, Eisenhower’s more immediate concerns soon turned to the developing crisis at Dienbienphu.

³⁸ Gardner, p. 149

³⁹ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 79

⁴⁰ Ibid.

PART III: CRISIS AT DIENBIENPHU

On March 13, 1954 the Vietminh launched an all out assault on the French garrison at Dienbienphu. General Giap, commander of the Vietminh forces, explained the importance of Dienbienphu by saying it was "...the keystone of the Navarre Plan...we considered that it should be wiped out if the Franco-American plot of protracting and expanding the war was to be smashed."⁴¹ In other words, it had become politically, if not militarily, decisive. General Ely requested urgent action by the United States. Noteworthy was the request for 25 additional B-26s for a third squadron which was to be furnished immediately on a temporary loan basis. The request was tabled, but Admiral Arthur Radford gave him approval to use American C-119 transport aircraft to drop Napalm provided no U.S. crews were involved.⁴²

PROBLEMS WITH FRANCE

The prospect of a NATO ally being defeated by a Communist satellite of the Soviet Union and Communist China was deeply troubling for Eisenhower. However, he faced several foreign policy contradictions. First, while his goal was to stop Communism, the French were striving to save their empire. This meant the U.S. viewed Indochina as a security matter, whereas the French viewed it as an issue of international prestige. Secondly, Eisenhower wanted France to both keep fighting in Indochina and join the European Defense Community (EDC). France, however, did not have the resources for both. As Bidault announced at the Berlin Conference, the French nation "could not allow its soldiers to fight on alone without the help of the United Nations and without any end to

⁴¹ Gardner, p. 164

⁴² *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 459

the war in sight," regardless of how much financial aid it received.⁴³ There was widespread fear in the State Department that unless the United States increased its aid, "the fall of Indochina would have a devastating effect on France, opening her up to being overwhelmed by a Communist sweep."⁴⁴

The President felt trapped by counter-balancing national interests, his lack of perceived alternatives, and French promises and maneuvering. If the French did not back the EDC, he faced having to provide a long term, large scale, U.S. military presence in Europe. But the French placed a far lower priority on EDC than did the U.S., in part because of the traditional French fear of an armed Germany, in part because the French estimate of Soviet intentions in Western Europe differed from that of the United States in that it placed a low probability on a direct Soviet intervention.⁴⁵ The French understood Eisenhower's dilemma and with each decision regarding European defense, were able to extract concessions from the U.S., either in the form of increased aid or reduced political pressure for reform in Indochina, or both. If France pulled out of Indochina, Eisenhower would have to carry on unilaterally if he was to halt Communism. Dulles advised the President, "We are confronted by an unfortunate fact-most of the countries of the world do not share our view that Communist control of any government is in itself a danger and a threat."⁴⁶ Knowing Eisenhower's predicament, the French threatened withdrawal from Indochina if U.S. aid was not forthcoming. Adding to these dilemmas was the domestic situation in France.

⁴³ Gardner, p. 169

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 135

⁴⁵ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 80

⁴⁶ Gardner, p. 137

Eisenhower viewed the Laniel government as his last hope on both the EDC and Vietnam issues, as the left-of-center government-in-waiting supported neither. When the Laniel government requested in the fall of 1953 a massive increase in American assistance, the State Department representative at an NSC meeting asserted that "if this French Government, which proposes reinforcing Indochina with our aid, is not supported by us at this time, it may be the last such government prepared to make a real effort to win in Indochina."⁴⁷ While U.S. aid strengthened the hand of Laniel and those wanting to continue the war, these were also the same Frenchmen who fought against American interference. Another dilemma was the issue of Vietnamese independence. If the French openly backed it, support for their war effort would be undermined; if they fought it, their efforts in Vietnam were doomed to fail. Finally, Eisenhower did not want the French negotiating at the upcoming Geneva conference faced with a deteriorating military situation as this would be tantamount to surrender.⁴⁸ He agreed with the head of the U.S. delegation at Geneva, Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, who stated "diplomacy has rarely been able to gain at the conference table what cannot be held on the battlefield."⁴⁹

UNITED ACTION

Eisenhower was determined not to intervene alone. To do so, he told the NSC, "would mean a general war with China and perhaps the USSR, which the United States would have to prosecute separated from its allies. It would amount to an attempt to police

⁴⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 79

⁴⁸ Gelb, pp. 54-55

⁴⁹ Herring, p. 41

the entire world...We should be everywhere accused of imperialistic ambitions.”⁵⁰ His solution was to attempt to build a wide consensus. But other events soon made that a very difficult proposition. On March 1, 1954 the atomic age entered a new era with the detonation of the largest thermonuclear device ever during the H-bomb test, BRAVO. The head of the Atomic Energy Commission, Lewis Strauss, held a press conference and the New York Times ran the headline, “H-BOMB CAN WIPE OUT ANY CITY” on the front page leading off an account of his comments.⁵¹ This had the effect of frightening allies and making it virtually impossible to rally support for the use of atomic weapons in local situations. It was clear that Eisenhower's New Look strategy of deterring conventional action with the threat of nuclear reprisal, as outlined in NSC 162/2, would play no part in the resolution of the Vietnam predicament.

As the situation at Dienbienphu grew more critical, several of his senior advisers, including the Vice President, the CJCS, the head of the NSC planning staff, and at times his Secretary of State, favored an American air strike to end the siege.⁵² At an NSC meeting in January 1954 it was decided to study “all feasible steps”, short of overt use of U.S. forces in combat, but Eisenhower declared a prohibition on sending American ground forces into operation in Indochina and appointed a special committee headed by Under Secretary of State Smith to come up with a plan “in specific terms, covering who does what with which and to whom.”⁵³ On April 5, the American ambassador to France, Douglas Dillon sent an urgent telegram to Secretary Dulles. He had been summoned to Laniel's office where he and Bidault “said that immediate intervention of a U.S. carrier

⁵⁰ Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, p. 131

⁵¹ Gardner, p. 183

⁵² Ambrose, p. 185

aircraft at Dienbienphu is now necessary to save the situation.”⁵⁴ Bidault concluded, “for good or evil the fate of Southeast Asia now rested on Dienbienphu.”⁵⁵ At an NSC meeting the next day Eisenhower said, “...in certain areas at least we cannot afford to let Moscow gain another bit of territory. Dienbienphu may be just such a critical point.”⁵⁶

In order to stop Moscow, Eisenhower envisioned a coalition of nations including (in addition to the U.S. and France), Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, along with troops from the Philippines and Thailand to avoid the appearance of a totally “white” intervention.⁵⁷ Referring to this coalition as *United Action*, he said, “This grouping would give us the needed popular support of domestic opinion and of allied governments, and we might thereafter not be required to contemplate a unilateral American intervention in Indochina.”⁵⁸ He went on to say, “It would be a great mistake for the United States to enter the fray in partnership only with France. *United Action* by the free world was necessary, and in such action the U.S. role would not require use of its ground troops.”⁵⁹ The U.S. Army indicated the forces required to achieve victory in Indochina would be seven divisions or their equivalent, with appropriate naval and air support if the French withdrew and the Chinese Communists did not intervene. If the Chinese Communists did intervene, the equivalent of twelve divisions would be required.⁶⁰ NSC Action 1074-A was adopted and stated, “U.S. commitment of combat forces would involve strain on the basic western coalition, increased risk of war with China and of general war, high costs in

⁵³ Gardner, p. 167

⁵⁴ Ambrose, p. 461

⁵⁵ Arnold, p. 169

⁵⁶ Gardner, p. 211

⁵⁷ Arnold, p. 168

⁵⁸ Gardner, p. 211

⁵⁹ Anderson, p. 47

U.S. manpower and money, and possible adverse domestic political repercussions.”⁶¹

Thus, it was clear the U.S. would not act unilaterally. Eisenhower felt Dienbienphu would inevitably fall unless action was taken, and set six conditions for subsequent American intervention in order to save Vietnam from the Communists:

- A full and clear grant of independence by the French
- British participation
- Some involvement by nations in Southeast Asia
- Congressional approval
- The French turn over the war to the U.S., but without American troops
- The French prove they were not just asking America to cover a fighting withdrawal ⁶²

It was becoming more and more clear that the French military effort in Indochina had to be separated from American policy. Having rejected calls for air strikes, he set about the business of building his alliance, *United Action*.

ALLIANCE BUILDING

Eisenhower used direct communications between heads of state, the media, and private meetings to garner international, American public, and U.S. Congressional support for *United Action*. In his attempt to build an alliance with the British, Eisenhower wrote directly to Churchill, appealing to his sense of history. He told him that history would remember those who established ties among free nations allowing them to “throw back the Russian threat and allow civilization to continue its progress. Destiny has given priceless opportunity to some of this epoch. You are one of them. Perhaps I am also one of the company on whom this great responsibility has fallen.”⁶³ He sent Dulles to London and

⁶⁰ *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 471-72

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 464

⁶² Ambrose, p. 177

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 174

Paris and personally wrote Churchill again urging British support for a coalition “willing to fight” to check Communist aggression. “...today we face the hard situation of contemplating a disaster brought on by French weakness and the necessity of dealing with it before it develops. We failed to halt Hirohito, Mussolini, and Hitler by not acting in unity and in time. That marked the beginning of many years of stark tragedy and desperate peril. May it not be that our nations have learned something from that lesson?”⁶⁴ In yet another letter to Churchill, Eisenhower said, “The important thing is that the coalition must be strong and it must be willing to join the fight if necessary. I do not envisage the need of any appreciable ground forces on your or our part. I have faith that by another act of fellowship in the face of peril we shall find a spiritual vigor which will prevent our slipping into the quagmire of distrust.”⁶⁵

In an effort to build public support through the media, Under Secretary of State Smith emphasized previous western victories against Communism. He told CBS news, “The brutal Soviet conquest of Czechoslovakia did not disintegrate the will of the West. It led to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty alliance. The violent conquest of the China mainland followed by the Korean aggression did not paralyze the will of the free nations. It led to a series of Pacific mutual security pacts...The violent battles now being waged in Vietnam and the aggressions...are not creating any spirit of defeatism. On the contrary, they are rousing the free nations to measures which we hope will be sufficiently timely and vigorous to preserve these vital areas from Communist domination.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Gardner, p. 213

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 190

⁶⁶ *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington D.C.), April 19, 1954, p. 589

Addressing the American public at an April press conference, Eisenhower emphasized the importance of Indochina, "First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs. Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world." He finally warned that if Indochina fell, the rest of Southeast Asia would "go over very quickly," like a "row of dominos" when the first is knocked over. "...You begin to talk about areas that not only multiply the disadvantages that you would suffer through loss of materials, sources of materials, but now you are talking really about millions and millions of people...So you have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences. Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its people to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses." He concluded, "So the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world."⁶⁷ The "Domino Theory" was born, but Dulles reported back from Geneva that to "my dismay the British are apparently encouraging the French in the direction of surrender which is in conflict not...only with our interest but what I conceive theirs to be."⁶⁸

As the Geneva Conference opened, Eisenhower met with Congressional leaders and told them, "We must have collective security or we'll fall. I don't see any reason for American ground troops to be committed in Indochina, don't think we need it."⁶⁹ Dulles tried to garner support from both Australia and New Zealand. In a conversation with Sir Roger Makins, the British ambassador in Washington, he said, "I feared that unless there was a clear US-UK position, the French would in fact sell out in Indochina, and that the

⁶⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 597

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 479

⁶⁹ Ambrose, p. 182

entire area of Southeast Asia would be greatly endangered, with serious consequences to both our countries and to Australia and New Zealand." The U.S. wanted a commitment of naval forces from both Australia and New Zealand, but more importantly, it wanted political support from the British.⁷⁰

THE BRITISH POSITION

Churchill was unimpressed with Eisenhower's argument and equally concerned about allowing the Americans to take the lead in pursuing a vigorous policy of halting Chinese expansionism in light of the recent H-Bomb tests. He told the House of Commons that Britain "was not prepared to give any undertakings about United Kingdom military action in Indochina in advance of the result of Geneva."⁷¹ As the situation at Dienbienphu grew worse, General Navarre warned Paris in the starkest terms yet: either the U.S. intervene with massive B-29 raids, or the French command must request a cease fire. Dulles pressed harder with a message to British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden from Eisenhower, "The British must not be able merely to shut their eyes and later plead blindness as an alibi for failing to propose a positive program."⁷² Admiral Radford put it more specific terms, "The only thing to do...is for US/UK more or less to take over the conduct of the war, push the French into the background and hope that the locals will be so inspired by this spectacle that they will rally against the Communists."⁷³ But Churchill's response had left little doubt. He concluded that "The French want us to look after France in Europe while America watches over her empire. It just won't do."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gardner, pp. 197, 208

⁷¹ Gelb, p. 59

⁷² Gardner, p. 236

⁷³ Ibid., p. 237

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 242

At a subsequent NSC meeting, virtually all of Eisenhower's closest advisers advocated some form of unilateral intervention, arguing as Dulles did, that American allies would follow suit if not immediately, then ultimately. Only Eisenhower held back. "How could the United States intervene alone? This seems quite beyond comprehension. Without allies and associates the leader is just an adventurer like Genghis Khan."⁷⁵ British opposition had sealed the unsuccessful fate of *United Action* and any possible American intervention.

With military intervention ruled out, the administration turned to diplomacy. Eisenhower and Churchill reached an agreed-upon position by 14 July 1954. As Ambassador Dillon reported to Dulles, both parties could respect "an agreement which:

- ...preserves at least the southern half of Vietnam
- ...does not impose any restrictions materially impairing Vietnam's capacity to maintain a stable non-Communist regime
- ...does not contain political provisions which would risk loss of the retained area to Communist control
- ...does not exclude the possibility of the ultimate unification of Vietnam by peaceful means
- ...and provides for the peaceful and humane transfer, under international supervision, of those people desiring to be moved from one zone to another."⁷⁶

The agreement, known as the Potomac Charter, was signed and point Three stated, "We will not be a party to any arrangement or treaty which would confirm or prolong their unwilling subordination. In the case of nations divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure they are conducted fairly."⁷⁷ The Potomac Charter allowed Eisenhower to accept a

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 258

⁷⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 555

⁷⁷ Gardner, p. 305

Vietnamese partition, something previously refused, and lay the foundations for the post-colonial order in Southeast Asia.

EISENHOWER'S LEADERSHIP

Analysis of Eisenhower's leadership and declassified White House records, during the period leading up to and through the Dienbienphu crisis, shows he was actively and directly involved with key decisions. His approach to public relations, contingency planning, and other areas of executive responsibilities demonstrated the skills he had developed during his military career. He made great use of his staff to examine and analyze the various policy options, thereby enabling him to present outcomes as bureaucratic solutions. He often used the NSC and his close advisers in a special way. He would lead them along, hinting at something or other, until he could get them to express ideas that he was testing out privately or, alternatively that he wanted to smoke out so as to clear the boards."⁷⁸ By allowing subordinates to use their skills, he was often able to let them absorb some of the public pressure caused by controversial decisions. Although it made him appear passive at times, he encouraged the image that his hands were tied by Congress and Allies. This had the effect of shielding him from personal attacks (No one accused him of "losing" Vietnam as Truman had "lost" China.), thereby paying excellent political dividends.⁷⁹ His knowledge of military affairs and the politics of war enabled him to perceive the cost of involvement in support of the French. He told the JCS that if the U.S. were to launch a preventive attack, it had to be against both Russia and China simultaneously. "I want you to carry this question home with you: Gain such a victory,

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 200

⁷⁹ Anderson, p. 46

and what do you do with it? Here would be a great area from the Elbe to Vladivostok ...torn up and destroyed, without government, without its communications, just an area of starvation and disaster. I ask you what would the civilized world do about it? I repeat there is no victory except through our imaginations.”⁸⁰ He told South Korean President, Syngman Rhee, who supported bombing the Communists, “Atomic war will destroy civilization. War today is unthinkable with the weapons which we have at our command.”⁸¹ America wanted toughness, without involvement. Eisenhower delivered.

⁸⁰ Ambrose, p. 206

⁸¹ Ibid.

PART IV: THE GENEVA CONFERENCE

THE RESULTS OF THE CONFERENCE

The Geneva Conference had originally been called to work out a political settlement for the Korean War. At the Quadripartite Foreign Minister's meeting in February 1954 in Berlin, the French delegation insisted, despite vigorous American objections, that Indochina be added to the Geneva agenda. Foreign Minister Bidault reportedly warned that if the United States did not acquiesce on this point, EDC would doubtlessly be scuttled.⁸² Several key decisions were made during the context of the Geneva Conference. As the U.S. had opposed French plans to put Indochina on the agenda, Eisenhower decided to take a largely passive role in the conference to avoid any responsibility in the outcome. One of his biggest concerns, as he explained in a letter to Churchill, was "...that some kind of armistice in Indochina will be used as an excuse for raising the issue of Red China's entrance into the United Nations."⁸³ Eisenhower sent explicit instructions to his old friend, Bedell Smith in Geneva. "You will not deal with the delegates of the Chinese Communist regime, or any other regime not now diplomatically recognized by the United States. The position of the United States in the Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference is that of an interested nation which, however, is neither a belligerent nor a principal in the negotiation. The United States is not prepared to give its express or implied approval to any cease-fire, armistice, or other settlement which would have the effect of subverting the existing lawful governments of the three aforementioned

⁸² *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 80

⁸³ Gardner, p. 308-309

states or of permanently impairing their territorial integrity or of placing in jeopardy the forces of the French Union in Indochina.”⁸⁴

The final declarations of the Geneva Conference on July 21, 1954 included among other items the following provisions:

- the cessation of hostilities,
- prohibition of the introduction of foreign troops,
- no foreign controlled military bases in either zone,
- no military alliances by either side,
- a provisional military demarcation line not to be interpreted as a political boundary,
- general elections to be held in July 1956,
- French guarantee of troop withdrawal and respect of Vietnamese independence and sovereignty,
- member nation agreement to avoid interference with internal affairs.⁸⁵

As the Geneva conference drew to a close, Eisenhower stated in a news conference, “Accordingly, the United States has not itself been party to or bound by the decisions taken by the Conference, but it is our hope that it will lead to the establishment of peace consistent with the rights and needs of the countries concerned. The agreement contains features which we do not like, but a great deal depends on how they work in practice...The United States is not prepared to join in the Conference declaration...The United States is actively pursuing discussions with other free nations with a view to the rapid organization of a collective defense in southeast Asia in order to prevent further direct or indirect Communist aggression in that general area.”⁸⁶ In Geneva, Under Secretary Smith added that the U.S. would “refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb them (the agreements)...and would view any renewal of the aggression in violation

⁸⁴ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 507

⁸⁵ Gardner, p. 415-416

⁸⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 605

of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security...we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted freely...the U.S. reiterates its traditional position that peoples are entitled to determine their own future and that it will not join in an arrangement which would hinder this.”⁸⁷

SOLUTIONS GENERATE PROBLEMS

During Geneva, two very important themes developed. First, it became clear that both South and North Vietnam were expected to sacrifice themselves in order to serve as “buffer states” between East and West. Both delegations, along with the U.S., had initially opposed any, even a temporary, partition. The final declaration denied both delegations the right to join a military alliance or have any foreign military base established in the “regrouping zones of the two parties.”⁸⁸ As no timeframe was established regarding how long these stipulations would remain in effect, this had the possible effect of leaving Vietnam, even after future unifying elections, a neutralized country, not in control of its own sovereignty. As had occurred at various times throughout its history, the future of Vietnam had been decided by outside powers.⁸⁹ Secondly, Emperor Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem Prime Minister of South Vietnam. Although the administration had been looking for a leader to match Ho Chi Minh's popularity and General Giap's military skills, the U.S. was “prepared to accept the seemingly ridiculous

⁸⁷ Gardner, p. 417

⁸⁸ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 572

⁸⁹ Gardner, pp. 283, 313 (Examples of domination over Vietnam by foreign powers are found: 1) in the first century B.C., when it was incorporated into the Chinese empire, then subsequently liberated in 40 A.D. by the Trung sisters, 2) in 1407, when it was again conquered by the Chinese and held for 20 years, and 3) in 1861, when the French captured Saigon and subsequently made Vietnam a French colony.

prospect that this Yogi-like mystic could assume the charge he is apparently about to undertake, only because the standard set by his predecessors is so low," declared Ambassador Dillon referring to Diem.⁹⁰ Eisenhower provided less than wholehearted support for the new Prime Minister when, referring to Diem's appointment, he stated at an NSC meeting, "in the lands of the blind, one-eyed men are kings."⁹¹

After Geneva, Eisenhower once again faced several counter-balancing national interests. On the one hand he wanted Diem to institute numerous reforms as a precondition to foreign aid. These reforms were needed in order for Diem to stabilize his government, but would also have the effect of undermining his own authority. Secondly, while delaying American aid would have the effect of forcing stabilization and less dependence on the U.S., hence improving the chance of defeating Communism in the long run, it would have the negative effect of increasing prospects of a Communist takeover in the short run.⁹² America had taken the lead from the French in determining Vietnam's future. What course Eisenhower would take became a matter of great debate.

VOICES OF CONCERN

Throughout the debate regarding courses of action to take with respect to Vietnam, several very important voices raised warnings to Eisenhower of U.S. commitment to support the new government under Diem. The first problem he faced concerned which conditions necessary for democratic reform should occur first, a stable government or a viable military? Responding to a draft State Department cable, the JCS

Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*, (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991), 2nd edition, p. 686-688

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 280

⁹¹ Herring, p. 47

⁹² Gelb, p. 63

stated the U.S. should not assume the burden of military training until there was "a reasonable strong, stable civil government in control". Dulles responded that "one of the most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese Government to become strong is to assist it in reorganizing the National Army and in training that army."⁹³ But many high ranking officials were questioning whether America should even be involved. Even before Geneva, a study prepared by the CJCS informed the Secretary of Defense that Indochina was devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces to that area would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities.⁹⁴ Major General Thomas Trapnall, the former MAAG Chief, debriefed Eisenhower on his departure from Vietnam, "There is no popular will to win on the part of the Vietnamese. A large segment of the population seeks to expel the French at any price, possibly at the cost of extinction as a new nation. A strictly military solution to the war in Indochina is not possible. The Vietminh, on the other hand, are fighting a clever war of attrition, without chance of a major victory, but apparently feeling that time is working in their favor and that French and U.S. public opinion will force eventual favorable negotiation."⁹⁵ A National Intelligence Estimate in August 1954 stated that even with U.S. support, the chance of building a strong stable government in South Vietnam was "poor".⁹⁶

By October 1956 the situation had grown even worse. A National Intelligence Estimate at that time concluded, "Diem will probably seek to bind the U.S. more specifically to the defense of Vietnam...Should the Vietminh elect openly to invade the South with regular forces, they are capable of defeating the VNA (Vietnamese National

⁹³ Ibid., p. 62

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 60

⁹⁵ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 487-497

Army) and any French forces (if Committed) now present in South Vietnam...the Vietminh have the capability to undertake local sabotage and terrorist actions, and small-scale but widespread guerrilla warfare. The Vietminh can reinforce these forces by infiltrating into South Vietnam. The Vietminh apparently exerts political influence in many areas scattered throughout South Vietnam.”⁹⁷ Secretary of Defense Wilson urged the President to get out as “completely and as soon as possible.” He warned that he could “see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained in that area.”⁹⁸

WORKING WITH DIEM

In November 1954, Eisenhower sent his trusted colleague, “Lightning Joe” Collins to Vietnam in order to formulate “a crash program to sustain the Diem government and establish security in Free Vietnam.”⁹⁹ To that end, he gave Collins “all the agencies and resources” of the United States in Vietnam and told him the basic American policy was “to maintain and support a friendly and independent non-Communist government in Vietnam and to assist it in diminishing and ultimately eradicating Communist subversion and influence.”¹⁰⁰ Eisenhower told Collins, “This assignment and these instructions are convincing evidence of the firm intention of the Government of the United States to help the Vietnamese people preserve and promote their and welfare.”¹⁰¹ Collins saw to it that

⁹⁶ Herring, p. 47

⁹⁷ Gareth Porter, Ph.D., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, (Stanfordville, N.Y.:Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), p. 13

⁹⁸ Herring, p. 47

⁹⁹ Anderson, p. 49

¹⁰⁰ Ambrose, p. 215

¹⁰¹ Gardner, p. 332

the French departure proceeded on schedule. The U.S. would no longer share the costs of maintaining French forces after December 31, 1954.¹⁰²

After only five months of close observation, Collins reported back to Eisenhower that Diem was incapable of providing the leadership Vietnam required. Criticism regarding Diem centered on his personality, family nepotism, and poor record in fulfilling promises to get much needed reforms underway. He even hinted that it might be preferable to turn the whole mess back over to the French, "Should it be determined that in view of the unsound situation in Vietnam the U.S. should gradually withdraw support from this country, then it would be necessary, in my opinion, to increase aid to the French expeditionary corps so that it would remain strong enough during the next year to permit the U.S. to withdraw essential equipment which might otherwise fall into Communist hands."¹⁰³ He said that even though the gradual withdrawal from Vietnam was the "least desirable" course of action, "in all honesty and in view of what I have observed here to date it is possible this may be the only sound solution."¹⁰⁴

Numerous other voices were being raised demanding Diem's removal. French Prime Minister, Edgar Faure, stated that Diem is "not only incapable but mad" and his country can "no longer take risks with him."¹⁰⁵ Briefing the NSC in April 1955, Collins insisted "Diem's number was up."¹⁰⁶ He simply had no knack for politics, nor skill in handling people. Collins nearly had Eisenhower convinced on the need to replace Diem, when fighting broke out in Saigon. The loyalty and capability displayed by Diem's troops

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 333

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 336

¹⁰⁴ Gelb, p. 63

¹⁰⁵ Herring, p. 54

¹⁰⁶ Gardner, p. 350

resulted in Eisenhower's decision to stay the course with Diem. As announced by Dulles, "Diem is the only means the U.S. sees to save Vietnam and counteract revolution. The U.S. sees no one else who can."¹⁰⁷

Throughout 1955, the situation in South Vietnam continued to worsen. The CJCS sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense assessing possible requirements for U.S. military intervention. "The JCS consider that for the near future, unassisted South Vietnamese forces will be capable of only limited resistance against determined overt aggression by Vietminh forces. Without a warning period in which U.S. preparatory actions were taken, a portion of South Vietnam would probably be overrun, and the integrity of elements of the defending forces would be impaired or lost."¹⁰⁸ By that fall, even Dulles, a staunch supporter of an independent Vietnam, believed the chance of American success to be only one in ten.¹⁰⁹ His support for Diem was less than enthusiastic, "We support what is there and as long as it is competent, honest, anti-Communist, and vigorous-Diem seems to fit the bill- we don't seem to see any particular reason to throw him out."¹¹⁰

One very important voice had a very optimistic outlook. In August 1955, on the eve of the French withdrawal, General O'Daniel sent a telegram from Saigon stating, "It is my seriously considered view that free Vietnam is at the critical point in its fight for freedom. The foundation has been laid for a strong government and society which offers opportunity for developing the loyalty of its citizens to the point where partisan warfare of resistance against the internal as well as external invader will be accepted as everyman's

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 350-351

¹⁰⁸ Porter, p. 10

¹⁰⁹ Herring, p. 47

duty and obligation. The Vietnamese people are ripe for an active change away from the Vietminh and toward the free Vietnamese government. A position of military strength is basic to the attitude necessary for popular support of the Diem government.”¹¹¹

SUPPORT FOR DIEM

Eisenhower decided to follow O'Daniel's advice to support Diem and proceed with U.S. aid to his government. He attributed France's failure in Vietnam primarily to attempts to perpetuate colonialism and was confident that without that problem, the U.S. could build a viable Non-Communist alternative to the Vietminh. “We must work with these people, and then they themselves will soon find out that we are their friends and that they can't live without us.”¹¹² Eisenhower sent “nation building” expert, Colonel Edward Lansdale, to Saigon to assist Diem. Lansdale arrived from the Philippines where he had helped secure the countryside against a Communist rebellion. Among other things, Lansdale was to “set forth a program of action without resort to overt combat operations by U.S. forces, designed to secure the military defeat of Communist forces in Indochina.” After a month in country, he concluded the French had made no movement toward Vietnamese independence and were very sensitive about any American dealings with “their” Vietnamese.¹¹³ Eisenhower knew he was putting the U.S. into the middle of a probable civil war in Southeast Asia.

The question Eisenhower had to answer was how deep should American involvement be. National Security Adviser, Robert Cutler, asked him “If the warfare must be localized in Indochina, cannot there be imaginatively conceived a type of action

¹¹⁰ Gardner, p. 342

¹¹¹ Porter, p. 5

which is not planned for decisive, old-style victory, with large U.S. forces committed against an immaterial enemy; but rather a warfare planned with slender forces to raise continuing, maximum unsettlement for the Communists?" Eisenhower did not think so. He responded, "If we were to put one combat soldier into Indochina, then our entire prestige would be at stake, not only in that area but throughout the world."¹¹⁴ He felt, however, that by following the models of Korea and Greece of building an indigenous army, they could defend the country by themselves, with American arms.¹¹⁵ As he told a news conference, "I think that when the freedom of a man in Vietnam...is taken away from him, I think our freedom has lost a little. I just don't believe that we can continue to exist in the world, geographically isolated as we are, if we just don't find a concerted, positive plan of keeping these free nations so tightly bound together that none of them will give up."¹¹⁶ A major foreign aid program was undertaken and, between 1955 and 1961, the U.S. provided Diem's government \$1 billion in economic and military assistance.¹¹⁷ Speaking to the National Editorial Association, Eisenhower defended his decision to stay engaged in Indochina, "...if we will not try to defend in any way the Southeast Asian area where she has a partial trade opportunity, what is to happen to Japan? It is going to the Communists."¹¹⁸

¹¹² Herring, p. 42

¹¹³ Gardner, p. 296

¹¹⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment, A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 178

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, p. 215

¹¹⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 606

¹¹⁷ Herring, p. 57

¹¹⁸ Gardner, p. 295

A BREAKDOWN OF PRINCIPLES

Following the decision to support Diem, several actions taken by Eisenhower and his staff, with regard to Vietnam were inconsistent with long standing American principles. Vietnamese self-determination was abandoned, lack of democratic reform was rationalized, and covert operations, including bribery, were ordered. In September 1954, the President sent a letter to Diem explaining the purpose of American aid was "in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the government of Vietnam in undertaking needed reforms."¹¹⁹ This letter, along with the SEATO alliance extending protection to Vietnam, contradicted the Geneva accords in two ways. First, Geneva stated neither side would enter into an alliance; second, it escalated South Vietnam's position from part of a divided country into a sovereign state.¹²⁰ Even though Eisenhower had publicly stated that the U.S. had not been a party to the Geneva agreements, it was clear the U.S. was pursuing a course of action contradictory to the stated position of allowing "peoples to determine their own future" as presented by Bedell Smith in Geneva.¹²¹ The future of South Vietnam was now being determined in Washington D.C.

This did not go unnoticed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) Foreign Minister, Pham Van Dong. He sent a note to the two co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference seeking their intervention to take "all necessary measures" to ensure

¹¹⁹ Ambrose, p. 210

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ An alternative view of these actions is that for democratic reform in Vietnam to succeed in the long term, the U.S. had to provide S. Vietnam protection from Communist aggression. Only through U.S. intervention could the Vietnamese truly "determine their own future."

compliance with the Agreement's provisions. "The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam deems that the implementation of the Geneva Agreements and the political settlement in Vietnam are being seriously menaced owing to the attitude of the authorities in South Vietnam."¹²² Diem, knowing he had American backing, formally declared his position regarding the Geneva conference and the elections it had called for. "The Government does not consider itself bound in any respect by the Geneva Agreements which it did not sign...the government always holds that the principle of free general election is a peaceful and democratic means only if, first of all, the freedom to live and freedom of vote is sufficiently guaranteed. In this connection, nothing constructive can be contemplated in the present situation in the North where, under the rule of the Vietnamese Communists, the citizens do not enjoy democratic freedoms and fundamental human rights."¹²³ Although the newly created S. Vietnam in fact had not signed the final declaration (The French commander signed the cease-fire agreements with the Vietminh on behalf of both Vietnam and Laos.), it was clear that Diem had little interest in working with the North to achieve an acceptable political solution.¹²⁴

Furthermore, although Diem paid lip service to democratic reforms, his actions contradicted his rhetoric even to the point of abolishing local elections and beginning a vigorous assault on his political opponents. In January 1956, Diem issued Ordinance No. 6 which gave officials "virtually a free hand to eliminate opposition...and permitted detention in special camps of suspected Communist agents or former agents without

¹²² Porter, p. 5-7

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 1-2

¹²⁴ Arnold, p. 217

charges.”¹²⁵ Instead of carrying out reform, he reached down and canceled local village councils, and replaced them with officials appointed from Saigon. The International Commission of Supervision and Control (appointed by the final Geneva declarations to supervise the 1956 elections), responded to complaints from the DRV with an investigation into the situation. Their Mobile Team 57 reported, “...the detention of prisoners...was in violation of Article 14(c) [of the Geneva Agreement],”¹²⁶ Dulles excused Diem's authoritarianism as being typical of Asia and even supported it as adding a measure of stability to the developing young nation.¹²⁷

Covert initiatives, as outlined in the New Look strategy, became part of the U.S./Diem relationship. CIA operatives distributed as much as \$12 million in bribes to key Vietminh military figures while Diem's forces attacked other Communist strongholds.¹²⁸ Edward Lansdale's (who had become Diem's chief political adviser) report on the Covert Saigon mission in 1954 and 1955 stated, “The Saigon Military Mission (SMM) was to enter Vietnam quietly and assist the Vietnamese, rather than the French, in unconventional warfare. The French were to be kept as friendly allies in the process, as far as possible. The broad mission for the team was to undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare. Later, after Geneva, the mission was modified to prepare the means for undertaking paramilitary operations in Communist areas rather than to wage unconventional warfare...” It failed. Hanoi was evacuated by the French in October 1954. The northern SMM team left with the last French troops, disturbed the grim efficiency displayed by the Vietminh in their takeover, the contrast

¹²⁵ Porter, p. 14

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 20

¹²⁷ Anderson, p. 53

between the silent march of the victorious Vietminh troops in their tennis shoes and the clanking armor of the well-equipped French whose western tactics and equipment had failed against the Communist military-political-economic campaign. Vietminh relations with the mass of the population during the fighting had been exemplary, with a few exceptions. In contrast, the Vietnamese National Army had been like many Asian armies, "adept at cowing a population into feeding them, providing them with girls."¹²⁹ It became clear to Eisenhower that democratic reform was not taking place and covert American actions were proving unsuccessful.

¹²⁸ Gardner, p. 339

¹²⁹ *The Pentagon Papers*, pp. 574-583

PART V: THE NORTH/SOUTH FRACTURE WORSENS

THE 1956 ELECTIONS

The 1956 elections called for by the Geneva Accords did not occur. Albeit for different reasons, none of the major actors involved (including the U.S., China, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France) were willing to stand up for DRV interests and make the 1956 elections a major international issue.¹³⁰ Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Walter Robertson, in a June 1956 address articulated the American position, "For our part we believe in free elections, and we support President Diem fully in his position that if elections are to be held, there first must be conditions which preclude intimidation or coercion of the electorate. Unless such conditions exist there can be no free choice."¹³¹ Although this was awkward for Eisenhower given the American tradition of free elections, he justified it by alleging North Vietnamese truce violations and restating the position that the U.S. had never accepted the accords.¹³²

In his memoirs, Eisenhower would later write, "I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80% of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai."¹³³ At an NSC meeting in August 1954, Eisenhower and Dulles both settled on a policy paper that stated the U.S. would "prevent a Communist victory through

¹³⁰ Anderson, p. 53

¹³¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 613

¹³² Herring, p. 55

¹³³ Dwight Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate For Change, 1953-1956*, (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 372

all-Vietnam elections.”¹³⁴ The standard answer Dulles now gave at press conferences became, “we can all hope that there will in fact be established conditions where there will be free elections.”

Cold War policy, on both sides of the line dividing the “free world” from the “Socialist bloc”, had long since decided on this euphemism of 'satisfactory conditions' to protect the larger interests of the superpowers against the vagaries of an unpredictable system of choosing governments. In Vietnam, as in other places such as Germany, the stakes were simply too high for the side that might lose to think about testing the system. As the Soviets could not tolerate an anti-Communist victory in East Germany, so too the Americans could not tolerate a Communist victory in South Vietnam.¹³⁵

By April 1956, the British were on the American side with regard to the elections. Responding to Soviet complaints about the violation of the Geneva agreements by South Vietnam, the British Embassy in Moscow informed the Soviet Foreign Ministry “it had urged the Diem government to consult with Hanoi in order to ensure that all the necessary conditions be obtained for a free expression of the national will as a preliminary to holding free elections by secret ballot...it may be recalled that, at the final session of the Geneva Conference on Indochina...the Vietnamese delegate formally protested 'against the hasty conclusion of the Armistice Agreement by the French and the Vietminh High Commands only.’”¹³⁶ Although Eisenhower, along with the other major players involved, was able to justify the prevention of the elections called for by Geneva in the context of Cold War

¹³⁴ Gardner, p. 318

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 348

¹³⁶ Porter, pp. 17-18

ground rules, U.S. actions once again violated the stated position that "peoples are entitled to determine their own future."

BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN

In September, 1956, Eisenhower signed NSC 5612/1, Statement of Policy on U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia. Among several other points, it stated the U.S. will, "1) Support the position of the Government of Free Vietnam that all-Vietnam elections may take place only after it is satisfied that genuinely free elections can be held throughout both zones of Vietnam, 2) Assist Free Vietnam to build up indigenous armed forces, 3) Treat the Vietminh as not constituting a legitimate government, and 4) Prevent the Vietminh from expanding their political influence and territorial control in Free Vietnam and Southeast Asia."¹³⁷ The MAAG expanded to approximately 300 people and grew even more in 1960.¹³⁸ It was clear the line against Communist expansion had been drawn in Vietnam and the Geneva agreements would play no part in the formulation of American policy.

Again, this did not go unnoticed by the Vietminh. An internal study in November 1956, and subsequently captured in South Vietnam in 1957, stated the Communist Party position, "On July 20, 1956, was the day the cease-fire agreement was signed at the Geneva Conference, requiring a free national general election to unify Vietnam, but has not been carried out. The reason is the Aggressive American imperialist and dictatorial feudalist Ngo Dinh Diem have sought by every means to sabotage and not carry out the

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 22

¹³⁸ Gelb, p. 67

agreement with hope of maintaining long-term division of our country, and turning the South into a colony and military base of the imperialists in order to provoke war..."¹³⁹

SUPPORT FOR DIEM REAFFIRMED

In Sept. 1955, Eisenhower suffered a heart attack, and the following year Dulles developed abdominal cancer. Although these developments restricted both their agendas for a while, Eisenhower returned to a rather heavy workload. In a special message to Congress in May 1957 Eisenhower stated, "The communist goal of conquering the world has never changed...We in our own interest, and other free nations in their own interest, have therefore joined in the building and maintenance of a system of collective security in which the effort of each nation strengthens all...Our assistance is thus insurance against rising tensions and increased dangers of war, and against costs that would skyrocket here at home should tragedy befall these struggling peoples...In America's own interest, we must stand ready to furnish special assistance when threatened disaster abroad foretells danger to our own vital concerns."¹⁴⁰

Many routine issues, of which Vietnam was considered one, were left to his staff, and they assured him events in Indochina were being well managed. Explaining American policy, Dulles said that as in Western Europe, the economic miracle would take place and Ho's grip on the imagination of the Vietnamese would loosen. All it needed was time-and an end to French obstructionism. "Liberation normally comes from within. But it is more apt to come from within if hope is constantly sustained from without. And that we are

¹³⁹ Porter, pp. 24-25

¹⁴⁰ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 614

doing in many ways.”¹⁴¹ Assistant Secretary of State Robertson in a June 1956 address stated, “In him, [Diem] his country has found a truly worthy leader whose integrity and devotion to his country's welfare have become generally recognized among his people. Asia has given us in President Diem another great figure; and the entire free world has become the richer for his example of determination and moral fortitude... Vietnam today is progressing rapidly to the establishment of democratic institutions by elective processes, its people resuming peaceful pursuits, its army growing in effectiveness, sense of mission, and morale, the puppet Vietnamese politicians discredited, the refugees well on the way to permanent resettlement, the countryside generally orderly and calm, the predatory sects eliminated and the venal leaders exiled or destroyed.”¹⁴² Eisenhower's policy of supporting Diem had been established, would not change regardless of reports from inside Vietnam, and it was now up to his foreign policy staff to implement it.

Several times Eisenhower would reaffirm his support for Diem, the man he hailed as a “tough miracle man” and the “savior” of South Vietnam.¹⁴³ In an address dealing mostly with the new Soviet leadership before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Eisenhower told them, “In foreign affairs, the new regime has seemingly moderated the policy of violence and hostility which has caused the free nations to band together to defend their independence and liberties...They [the Communists] were stopped finally in the northern part of Vietnam; and Diem, the leader of the Southern Vietnamese, is doing

¹⁴¹ Gardner, pp. 317, 329

¹⁴² *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 611

¹⁴³ Anderson, p. 54

splendidly and a much better figure in that field than anyone even dared to hope.”¹⁴⁴ But events in Vietnam indicated that Diem was far from doing “splendidly.”

Pressure was building for the Vietminh to take more dramatic action in the south. Hunted by Diem's security agents and unable to resist by armed force, many of them argued for a change in the DRV's policy of “peaceful political struggle” in the South. Some took matters into their own hands and assassinated police officials and other representatives of the Diem government. DRV leadership was concerned enough about the ensuing violence that it had the former Chairman of the Committee of the South during the days of the resistance to the French, lecture Southerners on the dangers of premature armed uprising.”¹⁴⁵ In March 1958, a letter from North Vietnam to Diem stated, “ To show our desire for peace and our earnest desire for the reunification of the country, in opposition to the American war policy, to insure peace and ease the people's contribution, a bilateral reduction of armed forces in the present situation would, in our opinion, be of great significance.”¹⁴⁶ Diem never saw fit to answer the letter.

QUEMOY REVALIDATES INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM

In 1958, an incident took place which was used in the argument regarding the spread of international Communism. Chinese Communists opened a severe bombardment on two islands under control of Free China, Quemoy and Matsu. In addressing the American people, Eisenhower said, “ It is as certain as can be that the shooting which the Chinese Communists started on August 23rd had as its purpose not just the taking of the island of Quemoy. It is part of what is indeed an ambitious plan of armed conquest. This

¹⁴⁴ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 610

¹⁴⁵ Porter, p.33

plan would liquidate all of the free world positions in the Western Pacific area and bring them under captive governments which would be hostile to the United States and the free world. Thus the Chinese and Russian Communists would come to dominate at least the Western half of the now friendly Pacific Ocean...But there must be sober realization by the American people that our legitimate purposes are again being tested by those who threaten peace and freedom everywhere. This has not been the first test for us and for the free world. Probably it will not be the last. But as we meet each test with courage and unity, we contribute to the safety and the honor of our beloved land-and to the cause of a just and lasting peace.”¹⁴⁷ In a news conference in October 1958, Eisenhower added, “We are talking about the Communist's constant, unrelenting pressure against the free world, against all of it.”¹⁴⁸ The fact that Eisenhower viewed Vietnam as a part of the larger Communist threat had long since been established. The fact that that threat was still perceived to be very real had once again been validated.

In his well publicized speech at Gettysburg College in April 1959, Eisenhower stated, “The first and most important fact is the implacable and frequently expressed purpose of imperialistic communism to promote world revolution, destroy freedom, and communize the world...The next fact we note is that since the Communist target is the world, every nation is comprehended in their campaign for domination. The weak and the most exposed stand in the most immediate danger...Still another fact! Strategically South Vietnam's capture by the Communists would bring their power several hundred miles into a hitherto free region. The remaining countries in Southeast Asia would be menaced by a

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 34-35

¹⁴⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 618

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 621

great flanking movement. The freedom of twelve million people would be lost immediately, and that of 150 million others in adjacent lands would be seriously endangered. The loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us and for freedom...we reach the inescapable conclusion that our own national interests demand some help from us in sustaining in Vietnam the morale, the economic progress, and the military strength necessary to its continued existence in freedom.”¹⁴⁹

FAILURE TO CONSIDER THE VIETMINH

For all Eisenhower's idealistic views of the world, he and his staff failed to account for third party influences, in this case the importance of the Vietminh (an arm of the Lao Dong Party). A National Intelligence Estimate in May, 1959 indicated, “that the potential for urban political unrest would be limited by South Vietnam's relatively high standard of living, thanks to U.S. economic assistance. It discounted the danger of a North Vietnamese military move against the South, asserting that such a decision would 'probably be made by Peiping and Moscow rather than by Hanoi.’”¹⁵⁰ But several documents that came to light in the last few years of Eisenhower's tenure indicated the Vietminh were indeed calling their own shots.

In May, 1959, a communiqué issued by the Lao Dong Party Central Committee, broadcast in English over the Vietnam News Agency reaffirmed “that the socialist transformation and construction in North Vietnam was still the most urgent task of the revolution...the use of armed force in the South was...not to interfere with North

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 625-626

¹⁵⁰ Porter, p. 46

Vietnam's internal development.”¹⁵¹ As late as July 1959, a captured Lao Dong document condemned actions taken by party members to assassinate individuals and begin armed struggle and general uprising as being deviations to party policy.¹⁵² By February, 1960 that policy however, had changed. An article in the Lao Dong Party Internal Journal stated the Party leadership had decided in January 1959 to authorize the use of armed forces in the South, but “only in support of political struggle and not for the purpose of militarily defeating Saigon. The Vietnamese People have only one path which is to build socialism in the North and overthrow the U.S.-Diem regime in the South and thus achieve peace, and unification by peaceful means.”¹⁵³ Although these decisions were made by Vietnamese, Eisenhower's staff assumed it was all still part of a grand Communist conspiracy.

In a letter to Diem, dated October 22, 1960, Eisenhower told the South Vietnamese President, “Although the main responsibility for guarding that independence will always, as it has in the past, belong to the Vietnamese people and their government, I want to assure you that for so long as our strength can be useful, the United States will continue to assist Vietnam in the difficult yet hopeful struggle ahead.”¹⁵⁴ The decision to support Diem would carry on until the end of Eisenhower's term.

In January 1961, prior to turning the Presidency over to John Kennedy, Eisenhower was briefed by Colonel Lansdale, who had been Diem's confidant and an ardent advocate for firm U.S. support. Upon returning from Vietnam, he told the President that the Vietcong had started to take over South Vietnam and it was time for

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 44

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 36

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp.53-54

either a reassessment or reaffirmation of American support for Diem and the Republic of South Vietnam.¹⁵⁵ Things were not going as well as Eisenhower's staff had led him to believe.

¹⁵⁴ *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington D.C.), October 25, 1960

¹⁵⁵ Anderson, p. 57

PART VI: CONCLUSION, THE EISENHOWER LEGACY

The leadership and system strengths that had served Eisenhower well in the period leading up to Dienbienphu, failed him after Geneva. His staff system, rather than being helpful, did little to alleviate the problem of comprehending the complexity of the situation. Instead, the situation was simplified into an 'East' versus 'West' scenario. By failing to accept an internal Vietnamese solution to political authority, he acted far from statesmanlike by placing U.S. actions in conflict with the move towards independence and failing to acknowledge Diem's increasing dependence on U.S. support.¹⁵⁶ Because of his rigid preconception regarding Communist expansion, evidence indicating independent action by the North Vietnamese was ignored. The "snowballing" effect of taking over Vietnamese responsibility from the French and continual support for Diem, foretold the ultimate American involvement, ground force participation. The die had been cast. Eisenhower had failed to use his military and political prestige to disengage the U.S. from the area. He had kept America out of war, but in Vietnam.

President Eisenhower's legacy was one of keeping the anti-Communist flame burning in general and in Indochina in particular. In a radio and television address to the American public in May 1957 he stated, "We must recognize that whenever any country falls under the domination of Communism, the strength of the free world-and of America-is by that amount weakened and Communism strengthened. If this process, through our neglect or indifference, should proceed unchecked, our continent would be gradually encircled. Our safety depends upon recognition of the fact that the Communist design for

such encirclement must be stopped before it gains momentum-before it is again too late to save the peace...We must maintain a common worldwide defense against the menace of International Communism. And we must demonstrate and spread the blessings of liberty.”¹⁵⁷

When one considers the Cold War rhetoric at the time, Eisenhower showed remarkable restraint in avoiding U.S. military involvement during the crisis at Dienbienphu. Superb handling of his staff and extensive military and political experience resulted in providing America the best solution available under the circumstances. However, his actions following Geneva tended toward the negative. The issue had essentially become one of nation building and Eisenhower pinned all his hopes on a Vietnamese leader who was unable to establish any form of broad based support and lacked the qualities required to meet the growing internal dissension. He was confident that new methods could reverse the deteriorating situation, but introduced only superficial changes.¹⁵⁸ In an overview of American policy regarding Indochina, Eisenhower briefed congressional leaders, “The United States is the central key, the core of democracy, economically, militarily, and spiritually...We are establishing international outposts where people can develop their strength to defend themselves...We are trying with these programs to build up for the United States a position in the world of freedom of action.”¹⁵⁹ His ambitious economic aid programs failed to provide any substantive solutions to the problem and only heightened American responsibility, while diminishing Diem's credibility. In the end, Eisenhower had kept the U.S. out of war, but had not

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 58

¹⁵⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 615

¹⁵⁸ Herring, p. 25

established peace. Instead, he left his successors with no answers and ever narrowing options that would eventually lead to the American tragedy of Vietnam.

¹⁵⁹ Gardner, p. 351

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